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A Strategic Left? Starmerism, Pluralism and the Soft Left

PAUL THOMPSON, FREDERICK HARRY PITTS AND JO INGOLD

Abstract

This article places the Labour Party's present post-Corbyn renewal in the context of previous periods of renewal in the party's recent history, associating with the new leadership of Keir Starmer a potential to rediscover the strategic project of the pluralist soft left as an alternative to the programmatic character of the hard left. After assessing the Corbynist hegemony established in the Labour Party between 2015 and 2019, it considers the current absence of any clearly defined set of principles or values underpinning 'Starmerism'. It then looks back to the Kinnockite ascendancy in the 1980s, and the Blairite ascendancy in the 1990s, as possible templates for how the party reassesses its positioning with reference to changing electoral, social and economic circumstances. A critique of Corbynism's left populism culminates in a consideration of the possible grounds for a new pluralist agenda attuned to the policy and electoral challenges Labour faces today.

Keywords: Labour Party, British politics, the left, Keir Starmer, pluralism, populism

Introduction

AFTER A LEADERSHIP election where most candidates carefully crept around the legacy of Corbynism, the first few months with Keir Starmer at the helm have been characterised by a continued absence of bigger-picture thinking. As Starmer has settled into the leadership, commentators from across the spectrum have issued a series of 'whither Starmerism' missives, searching for a systematic approach underpinning his politics.¹ To query the absence of a distinctive 'Starmerism' in the wake of a bruising defeat and the worst global crisis since the Second World War does seem somewhat unrealistic. Labour under Starmer has done well to claw back quickly a massive poll deficit in difficult circumstances. Setting out ideological coordinates has correctly taken a back seat to some savvy strategising around the pandemic response. Breaking free of burdensome 'pledges' and immovable 'values' creates the space to build slowly something new. There were signs in Starmer's recent virtual conference speech that a substantive vision is gradually cohering.²

When Keir Starmer was elected Labour Party leader and formed his Shadow Cabinet, it was widely reported as the return of the 'soft left'.³ Soft left is generally taken to mean the space between Corbynite remnants on the left, and Progress and Labour First on the right. The soft left's standard bearer since 2015, Open Labour, is attracting new members and the ire of an increasingly irrelevant hard left. Asserting itself online and in internal party elections, through Open Labour the soft left is gaining a stronger organisational profile, underpinned by values of openness and pluralism. But positions and policies which go beyond appeals to party democracy are less well defined. Recent accusations that Starmer's new leadership lacks vision, meanwhile, suggest an absence of any coherent soft left agenda at the top of the party.⁴ If the new leadership represents the return of the soft left, it has arisen largely without ideological trace. Unlike Blairism, it draws from no wellspring of intellectual renewal or factional warfare waged for a decade or more previously.

In its sudden resurfacing, the soft left in this respect resembles Corbynism. As its contradictions became clear, Corbynism

appeared to be a 'crest without a wave'.⁵ An intellectually moribund hard left emerged blinking from the political wilderness, its accidental leader thrust into the limelight by the nominations of self-described 'morons' in the parliamentary Labour Party.⁶ The leadership election in 2015 unlocked a latent yearning for political authenticity and purity, teamed with a post-crisis populism of the left.

Once in command of the party machine, Corbynism did produce a new political and media ecosystem that stimulated some passionate debate and activism on the more creative shores of Momentum. John McDonnell led some serious and innovative policy work, but intellectually, the usual hard left reflexes backfilled the initial ideas deficit: outdated anti-austerity politics, inconsistently applied anti-imperialism, and an often conspiracist anti-capitalism.⁷ Rather than mooring the project in a set of underpinning principles, these positions actually left the party adrift morally and electorally—namely in its response to the anti-semitism within its ranks and the Russian chemical attack in Salisbury.⁸ Corbynists saw these principles as projecting integrity, but they in fact substituted for a coherent strategy. This lack of strategy is not something specific to the particular time and place, but foundational to the hard left: the hard left is in essence programmatic rather than strategic. Its politics flow from a belief in certain fundamental truths and values which, while tweaked to fit the times, imply a strongly maximalist realisation of every piece of a political and policy programme, with little consideration of electoral or economic feasibility, or of the need for trade-offs and compromises.

There is a massive hole where a strategic analysis of the electorate should be, precisely because the hard left is ideologically pre-disposed to believe that it is already speaking for the working class and sometimes more nebulously 'the people'.⁹ Rather than electoral dynamics or economic conditions, the barriers to the achievement of a maximalist programme are seen as lack of 'correct' leadership, activists on the ground, and the connivance of the media and other shadowy forces arraigned against the left. The comprehensive defeat of Corbynism in the 2019 election was a case in point. Corbynists,

including union bureaucrats, claimed to speak for the working class even as a majority of them backed the Tories.¹⁰

Where the hard left represents the 'programmatic' left, then, any soft left project worth its salt must instead represent a 'strategic' left attuned to the shifting present. Political strategy, in this sense, has two fundamental objects. The first is a continuing ability to analyse and understand core trends in economic social and cultural structures—in other words, to have a handle on the changing dynamics of capitalism itself. The second is to understand changes in the electorate—shifts in attachments, institutions and preferences, and how they interact with broader structural changes. In his virtual conference speech, Starmer was right to say that all successful Labour leaderships possess a modernising project. The difficulty facing Starmer is that the Labour centre-left has spent little time in the last five years developing an intellectual agenda independent of Corbynism. It is dangerous for Labour to play host to two ascendancies within a decade without any roots or coordinates. In defining his modernising project within the space opened up by this absence, Starmer could look back at the last time the 'programmatic left' was influential in Labour—the 1980s—and the struggle of the 'strategic left' to defeat it.

Pluralism in opposition

Although Neil Kinnock's famous 1985 conference speech confronting Militant is generally considered the catalyst for the defeat of the hard left in the 1980s, the serious work of changing hearts and minds among the membership was actually undertaken by the Labour Coordinating Committee (LCC).¹¹ At the time of the 1983 election defeat, the LCC was the umbrella organisation for the party's left, but as the scale of the electorate's rejection became clear, the LCC split. Tony Benn, the lodestar of the hard left minority, described the defeat as a 'triumph for socialism', denominated in the 8 million people who voted for the party's radical manifesto.¹² The soft left LCC majority, meanwhile, went its own, modernising way. While retaining many of the radical elements on economic policy, there was an acceptance

that the structure and culture of social class had changed, developing new preferences and attachments. Policies such as blanket opposition to tenants' right to buy their council homes were no longer viable.

Beyond particular positions and policies, something else was happening: the soft left was redefining its core values. Drawing lessons from the limitations of top-down socialism in both its labourist and communist form, the central leitmotif of the new politics was *pluralism*. Powered by interventions by the likes of Mike Rustin, Geoff Hodgson and Peter Hain, this called for pluralism in forms of ownership; market conditions and planning mechanisms; the social and political actors central to political change; and the citizenship rights granted employees, consumers and tenants.¹³ A 'mass politics' perspective focussed on turning the party outwards, beyond the limited activist worldview. As the LCC argued in 1986:

We must not confuse the necessary alliances of activists with the central task of building a new popular majority for socialism. The two only partially overlap. Partly because of the unique and contrasting needs of different groups, Labour must construct a politics and programme that not only addresses the needs of particular interest groups, but appeals across social boundaries to people as citizens as well as workers, women or consumers.¹⁴

In contrast, the hard left fought to maintain continuity with the 1983 maximalist programme, unconcerned that the electorate had rejected it. Positions dominate politics, but adherence to positions marks ideological purity. Little or no effort was made to analyse changing economic or cultural conditions. The dominant view was that Thatcherism represented business as usual for capitalism. Emphasis fell on engineering confrontations between the government and the few local authorities where the hard left held sway, like Liverpool and Lambeth. In the face of its impossible demands and unwinnable battles, Kinnock's conference speech challenging the hard left cascaded down through the LCC's relentless campaign for democratic renewal, which instigated a decisive shift among the membership,

resulting in soft left slates winning National Executive Committee elections.¹⁵

Nevertheless, whatever advances were being made, the soft left was not running the party. Kinnock and his deputy Roy Hattersley's leadership was firmly centrist, and while modernisation started apace, little progress was made in developing credible, radical policies for the new era. The leadership floundered around, wasting considerable time and effort developing and debating Hattersley's inquiry into the party's 'aims and values' and then inaugurating a well-intentioned but ultimately inconclusive policy review.¹⁶ Preoccupied with principles ultimately contingent on changing social and economic conditions, the defeat in the 1992 election indicated the limits of the existing modernisation project and the need for strategy.

Pluralism in power?

Whereas the 1980s are a distant memory to much of the modern party membership, the lessons learnt from the 1990s still resonate. The lessons drawn from New Labour are not always the right ones, however. One of the abiding myths of the hard left is that New Labour under Blair represented a simple and slavish continuity with neoliberalism, but the New Labour project is best understood in two phases: winning and governing. The former was a brilliantly successful reimagining of Labour as a party in touch with the modern world and its electorate, with a popular leader and leadership team. The 1997 manifesto was minimalist rather than maximalist, but component parts like devolution and the minimum wage were radical. In the transition between winning a popular majority and developing a strategy for governance, Blair went through a period of experimenting with the development of a radical, third way stakeholder approach, drawing on the intellectual energies unlocked in the revisionist left in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

But this transition between 'winning' and 'governing' stalled. Blair promised to both win and govern as New Labour, without accounting for the different strategic requirements attached to each. Hamstrung by tactical commitments to Tory spending plans, a

huge opportunity was missed to develop a more transformative agenda. Two strategic orientations subsequently underpinned Labour policy either side of the millennium. The first, inherited from the pages of *Marxism Today* and pivotal to the Blair project via advisors like Charles Leadbeater, was an optimistic narrative about capitalism that projected information and knowledge as the new sources of wealth, and high-skill creative and professional jobs as the engine of growth in the labour market.¹⁷ The second was a consumer-driven and market-led approach to public sector reform, most notably expressed in the work of Anthony Giddens and Julian Le Grand.¹⁸ The knowledge economy narrative allowed the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, to use the proceeds of economic expansion and financial deregulation to make a significant boost to public spending. But, with financialisation the real driver of economic change, deregulation was a disaster waiting to happen. Public sector reform, meanwhile, had positive effects in terms of waiting times and other outcomes, but led to wasteful reorganisations, exclusion of employee expertise and a proliferation of top down targets.

The correct lesson to learn from New Labour is what separates out the soft or 'strategic' left from the centre. Unlike centrists in the mould of Blair and Brown, left social democrats are intrinsically more sceptical about capitalism, recognising that its inbuilt tendencies imply the unequal concentration of wealth and power. This is not the blanket anti-capitalism of the hard left, given that capitalism can take different forms, shaped by different strategic choices. But it does recognise that a transformative political agenda requires serious and systematic intervention and regulation. The destruction of Labour's electoral advantage in the 'red wall' did not start with the excesses of Corbynism. It was also rooted in the mistaken assumptions about the benign growth trajectories of contemporary product and labour markets forged in the incomplete strategic transition from 'winning' to 'governing' under Blair. In reality, many regions were being left behind, with shrinking opportunities and the replacement of secure, skilled jobs by industries with a preponderance of lower skill and often more precarious work. While Blairism

is often characterised as overly pragmatic by its opponents, these outcomes were the result of active strategies that, crafted less to govern than to win elections, optimistically misread the direction of contemporary capitalism and the electorate. One consequence was the partial erosion of Labour's electoral base.

Populism and its discontents

The global financial crash finally and fatally undermined the New Labour strategy, given that it was premised on financialised and debt-fuelled economic expansion paying for investment in public services and labour market support for the low paid. Tory strategy under David Cameron and George Osborne combined liberal social policies with aggressive austerity measures to drive down public spending. It worked to the extent that the majority of the electorate came to believe that such measures were a necessary antidote to rising debt, and that Labour was responsible for there being, as Labour Treasury Secretary, Liam Byrne, put it in an infamous memo to his Tory successor, 'no money left'.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the soft left inclinations of Ed Miliband and his strategic advisor, Stewart Wood, were not consolidated into any distinctive strategic approach, and the party defaulted to a dispiriting brand of cautious retail politics that failed in the 2015 election.

Two factors changed the political landscape and its strategic possibilities. The first was the Brexit victory in the 2016 referendum, setting in motion the inexorable rise of the populist right and the recasting of electoral blocs around remain and leave positions. The second was Corbyn's victory in Labour's 2015 leadership contest, which created the conditions for the emergence of an anti-austerity left populism that, pitted against the ineffectual, unprepared Theresa May administration in the 2017 general election, told the right story at the right time. But for all the rhetoric Labour advanced, the Tories still won. More importantly, within a short time the battle lines were redrawn around Brexit, and under Corbyn's leadership Labour was completely unable to fashion any substantial or agile strategic response.

In this context, a contest of rival populisms was only ever likely to have one winner. An unpopular leader and a maximalist programme that few trusted or found credible went up against Boris Johnson's simple, resonant message on Brexit, underpinned by a strategic land grab on Labour heartlands led by his electoral mastermind Dominic Cummings. Still programmatically fighting the last war against austerity and neoliberalism when a newly interventionist Tory party was changing the ground of politics, Corbynism was not the substantial and significant social and political force it had appeared to have become, but the virtual, disconnected movement many had suspected it to be in the first place.²⁰ This was not least in the red wall seats where the election was won and lost. Simultaneously convinced of its capacity to speak for the working class, rapt in pursuit of an imaginary 'non-voter', and beguiled by the emergence of new progressive coalitions in its urban heartlands and university towns, Corbynism was wholly ill-equipped to deal with the further erosion of this part of Labour's traditional support.²¹ Throw in the party's decimation in Scotland, and Starmer inherits from the catastrophe of Corbynism an incredibly difficult political landscape around which to develop an electorally successful political strategy.

Signs of strategy

Today, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that party politics on both sides of the aisle has reverted, at times tentatively and temporarily, to technocratic type. But even this seemingly favourable post-populist context presents Labour with the strategic threat of an agile and ambitious Tory operation often let down by its lackadaisical leader. As indicated in Michael Gove's recent Ditchley speech, the Tories are taking advantage of the pandemic to accelerate their own pre-existing big-picture agenda for reform, targeted at the voters Labour lost at the last election.²² Taking forward the 'levelling up' project resulting from their election success across the so-called red wall, this agenda is underpinned by appeals to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and resonates with a wider shift across the

political spectrum towards a more interventionist, post-austerity state. Whether under Miliband or Corbyn, the political economy guiding recent party policy was defined by opposition to austerity and critiques of free-market capitalism struck in the long aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. While this was necessary, Labour cannot compete in today's changed landscape by remaining wholly in the same posture.

Starmer's 'modernisation' speech at Labour's virtual party conference in September showed the first tentative signs of a fresh strategic approach. This displays the influence of his new Director of Policy, Claire Ainsley, whose book *The New Working Class* combines a sociology of demographic shifts in class relations around work and social and economic life that makes a convincing case for how policies should be developed and communicated in light of these changes.²³ Ainsley's strategic approach pivots around a 'values offer' for the electorate to identify with leader and party. This 'offer' is, in itself, based on a close reading of changing economic and cultural conditions, framed in terms of the rise of a new service-based social, working class, with a mixture of precarious and more stable jobs and incomes. It suggests that Labour's communication and policies should articulate and mobilise the 'core moral languages' of voters, including care, fairness, loyalty, decency and family. Some of these themes can certainly be seen in Starmer's conference speech. The leadership clearly feels that it is at the 'values offer' stage, without the need for detailed policies at the moment. At this stage of the electoral cycle and mid-pandemic, this is the right approach.

Developing a strategic approach that is evidence based is welcome, but this is clearly also the beginning, not the end, of strategy. There are a number of tensions and issues. For example, as these values are shared across much of the electorate, to what extent do they capture the diverse experiences of the new working class, the assumed potential core vote? Many members of this class live in Labour's urban heartlands, but also in the smaller red wall towns, yet their experiences and preferences often differ sharply on some issues. A granular analysis should inform the priorities and trade-offs that will

be a necessary feature of further strategic and policy developments and coalition building. The success of the Biden/Harris campaign in winning back key 'blue wall' states in the US may also offer clues as to electoral coalitions, but the distinctive social cleavages in the two countries render doubtful any simple transferability.

Labour's electoral offer in the current context could be sharpened by foregrounding the twin principles of the modern soft left that emerged in the 1980s—egalitarianism and pluralism. Admittedly, these terms do not figure straightforwardly in public language, but they can be adapted to do so in communication and policy. Importantly, the pluralist strand within the Labour Party has always seen beyond the horizon of the centralised state in policy making, seeking to wield it only to afford other forms of power in society. There is a danger that the new 'postliberal' interventionism on right and left re-concentrates power in the hands of a more directly politicised state. This would leave unsatisfied the desires for greater control over our lives, as expressed in a distorted fashion in elements of the Brexit campaign. Pluralism should guide policies that signal to the public a major devolution of economic and political power. Such devolution resonates with the experiences of many northern communities during the pandemic, but could be extended by situating devolution measures within a broader federal agenda for the UK, thus addressing some of the very tough challenges in Scotland. Despite the devolution agenda through mayoral combined authorities and 'city deals', the reins of Whitehall still pull hard in the UK, with the incredibly centralised Westminster model. The Tories are still slow to offer full devolution powers and this limits what regions and locales can do. A commitment to electoral reform would also be an important signal about a pluralist political settlement that would appeal to a different segment of a potential electoral coalition.

Like the Tories, Labour can look to Roosevelt's New Deal for inspiration in this. At the same time as wielding state power in an unprecedented fashion, the New Deal succeeded precisely by giving it away.²⁴ By design or by defect, Roosevelt's reforms saw state action enable and stimulate political

and social contestation that introduced new dynamism to work, welfare and the economy. Jobs programmes devolved power to groups and communities to create collectively a new world of work in the shadow of the Great Depression. Encouragement of trades unions mobilised workers to bargain for better pay and conditions, spurring employers to invest in skills and technologies, in turn generating productivity gains. The continued Conservative hammering of trade unions means that this is completely absent from current policy responses to the productivity puzzle and skills gaps. A pluralist agenda, meanwhile, would promise to rebuild the world of work post-pandemic through channels for worker representation, workplace negotiation and sectoral bargaining, establishing bottom-up means to address economy-wide issues around skills and productivity. Through these policies to devolve power to workers and communities, Labour could offer a more convincing and genuine vision of the government's own 'levelling up' agenda moored in a much more fundamental redistribution and redirection of resources than Tory plans imply. Though sharp struggles are likely around the mode of exit from the EU, such an egalitarian, pluralist approach to economic rebalancing would help signal that Labour has become the party of 'rebuild' rather than continuity remain, creating potential for the construction of a post-populist electoral coalition.

To conclude, in examining some of the historical and contemporary factors that have shaped the politics of the soft left, we are not suggesting that this article has identified all its distinctive features or differences with the hard left. In focussing on issues of strategy and the limitations of a programmatic approach, we have argued that an understanding of how to win is as important as an understanding of what to stand for. Some of the foundations for a strategic left may be emerging under Starmer, informed by the work of his policy chief, Clare Ainsley. It is also the case that strategic calculation does not in itself signal that the outcomes have a distinctive soft left political character. The parting shots of disillusioned hard leftists currently exiting Labour speak predictably of betrayal, petty nationalism and shifts to the right. This speaks more to their own

disappointment than to a fair and robust assessment of current developments. The issue is more about how Labour moves beyond the necessary, but insufficient, political framing of competence in the face of the incompetence of Johnson and his Cabinet. Alongside the emergent 'values offer' under Starmer, the party needs to give a clearer sense of what it wants the 'new normal' to look like. This will not be a re-run of all or even most of the pledges from the maximalist programme Labour offered in the 2019 election. But it will need to demonstrate its own distinctive radicalism, because business as usual will not cut it.

Paul Thompson is Emeritus Professor of Employment Studies at the University of Stirling. Frederick Harry Pitts is Lecturer in Work, Employment, Organisation and Public Policy at University of Bristol School of Management. Jo Ingold is Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at Deakin Business School, Australia.

Notes

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